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Under Destruction II

By Jen Schwarting

Jean Tinguely's "Homage to New York" was performed in MoMA's Sculpture Garden on an icy winter evening in March, 1960. The sprawling, scaffold-like kinetic sculpture was built onsite, and both the inclement weather and outsized scope of production were likely factors in the failure of the mechanized structure to fully operate and self-destruct as planned. Still, Tinguely's vast assemblage of inter-connected appliances was wildly ambitious, chaotic, and for the audience, uniquely visceral, as overlapping audios produced a vociferous roar and smashed-together bottles released a rancid stench—all before the machine caught on fire.

Standing in front of his smoldering "Homage," Tinguely was said to have cheerfully (and somewhat circuitously) stated: "You can't expect the end of the world to end the way you want it to." Yet his work did succeed in humorously addressing fears of impending disaster—society doomed to



self-destruct in over-consumption, if not completely self-annihilate in nuclear war. The Museum Tinguely in Switzerland houses the artist's self-destroying sculptures and his groundbreaking kinetic works, and it organizes exhibitions of artists influenced by Tinguely's experimentation and legacy. Similarly, the contemporary group exhibition, *Under Destruction*, comes to the Swiss Institute in New York divided into three successive installments—a limitation of the space's modest, second-floor gallery, but further evidence of the organization's excellent programming.

Copyright of Michael Landy, courtesy of Artangel, London.

ON VIEW
Swiss Institute
 May 18 – June 19,
 2011
 New York

Under Destruction II opens to what sounds like a demolition site and a clamoring of potential energy. Competing for attention are the amplified soundtracks of three adjacent videos: the reverberate screeching in Christian Marclay's "Guitar Drag" (2000); the hum of reciprocating saws in Michael Landy's "Break Down" (2001); and the perpetual whump of rocks striking metal in Jimmie Durham's "Stoning the Refrigerator" (1996). The videos are intermittently drowned out by the sound of Liz Larner's "Corner Basher" (1988), a viewer-operated, kinetic sculpture topped by a wrecking ball that spins, lurches, and destroys the gallery walls with an unpredictable force.

The exhibition is thrilling, and many of the works in the vein of Tinguely serve up wit with destruction, such as Martin Kersels's "Pink Constellation" (2001), a model bedroom built to rotate 360 degrees. In the video documentation, Kersels performs in the room as it is literally turned upside-down and he is comically, yet disconcertingly, crushed by falling furniture. Intensifying the viewer experience with biting humor and a pervasive, sickly-sweet smell is Johannes Vogl's "Untitled (Machine To Produce Jam Breads)" (2007), a mechanized assembly system dispensing piles of breakfasts that continually go to waste.

Themes of reckless consumption and exhaustion permeate the exhibition, though Michael Landy's "Break Down" most closely mirrors Tinguely's critical position on consumerism and accumulation. In 2001, Landy took all of his possessions to a London showroom, displayed them on a large circuit of moving conveyor belts in a factory-like setting, and organized uniformed workers to

categorize, chop-up, shred, and destroy everything he owned. “Everything” included his passport, his car, and valuable works made by his friends Gillian Wearing and Damien Hirst. The destruction of artworks was Landy’s ultimate statement of artistic commitment to his project—deemed by the Turner Prize committee an act of unforgivable transgression—and controversial enough to allegedly cost the artist the prize.

“Break Down” is a work of daring and determination, and—with so much at stake for the artist—deeply satisfying for a viewer to consider. Lately, a lot of work being shown in the New York galleries seems, by contrast, purposely provisional, flat, formal, and so *polite*. The aggression, intensity, and dark humor of the works in the exhibition, many completed about a decade ago, feels refreshing—and yet somehow, clearly dated. The works recall a preoccupation with entropy and demonstrate a time, just before the digital age as we know it, when clunky machines and industrial appliances, pick-up trucks, and refrigerators could still represent a power to be subverted.

If there is renewed interest in this approach, it can currently be seen at the US Pavilion in Venice, as Allora and Calzadilla’s massive overturned military tank spins its wheels. While their machine noisily portends a nation’s exhaustion of resources, society’s ultimate doom and destruction will probably appear in the form of something far more innocuous. We should keep an eye on Christian Marclay, who often has his finger on the pulse, winning the Biennial award with his utterly brilliant “The Clock”—a riveting, meticulously crafted loop of Hollywood entertainment that runs 24 hours, non-stop.

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The third installment of the exhibition, *Under Destruction III*, will be on view at the Swiss Institute: June 29 – August 7, 2011.